

Konstantin
PAUSTOVSKY

The Rumpled Parrot

 RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Drawings
by GREGORY DAUMAN





Konstantin PAUSTOVSKY

The Ruffled Sparrow

Translated from the Russian
by Fainna SOLASKO

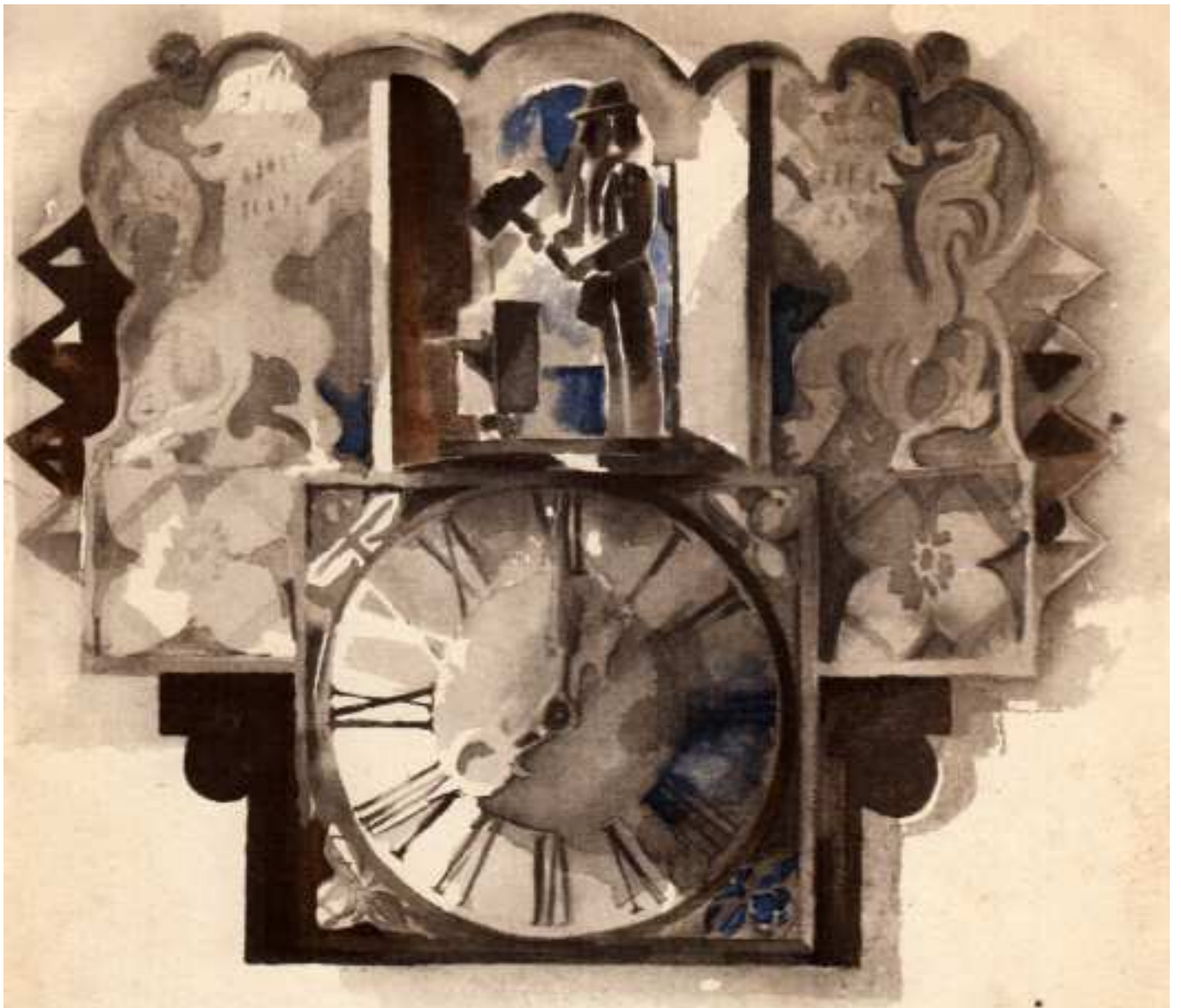


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A brass blacksmith the size of a little tin soldier raised his hammer in the old wall clock. The clock clicked, and the smith brought his hammer down upon a tiny brass anvil. A hasty ringing echoed through the room, rolled under the bookcase and died away.

The smith struck the anvil eight times. He was about to strike it a ninth when his hand jerked and stopped in mid-air. He stood there with his arm raised for a whole hour until it was time for him to strike the anvil nine times.

Masha stood by the window, but did not turn around. If she did, her nanny, Petrovna, would be sure to wake up and make her go to bed.

Petrovna was dozing on the sofa. Mama, who was a ballet dancer, had gone to the theater as always. She never took Masha along.

The theater was huge. There were great stone columns in front. Four bronze horses reared up on the roof, and a man wearing a laurel wreath who must have been very strong and bold was reigning in the horses. He had pulled them up at the very edge of the roof. Their front legs even hung over the edge. Masha tried to imagine what a commotion there would have been if the man had not been able to rein in the bronze horses: they would have galloped off the roof and onto the square below, thundering by with a great clanging noise.

Mama had been very nervous the past few days. She was going to dance the part of Cinderella for the very first time and had promised to take Petrovna and Masha to the premiere.

Two days before the premiere Mama took a tiny bouquet of spun-glass flowers from a chest. Masha's daddy had given it to her. He was a seaman and had bought it in some distant land.

Masha's daddy had gone off to war. The crew of his ship had sunk several nazi ships and had been torpedoed, and Masha's daddy had been wounded, but he had pulled through. Now he had sailed far away to a place called Kamchatka, but he would be back by spring.

Mama said something to the glass flowers as she took the bouquet from the chest. That was very strange, because she had never spoken to things before.

"See?" she whispered. "You won't have to wait any longer."

"Wait for what?" Masha asked.

"You're too little. You won't understand," Mama said. "When Daddy gave me this bouquet, he said, 'Be sure to pin this to your bodice after the Ball Scene, when you first dance the part of Cinderella. Then I'll know you'll be thinking of me.'"

"Well, I do understand," Masha said crossly.

"What do you understand?"

"Everything!" Masha said and turned red, because she couldn't bear not to be believed.

Mama put the glass bouquet on her dressing table and told Masha not to touch it, because it was very fragile.

Now it was evening. Masha had her back to the gleaming glass flowers on the dressing table. It was so still it seemed as though the whole world were asleep: the house, the garden down below and the



stone lion that guarded the gate and was getting whiter and whiter, because of the snow that was drifting down on it. Masha, the radiator and the winter were the only ones who were up. Masha was looking out the window, the radiator was softly piping its warm song, and the winter kept sending white snowflakes down from the sky. They swept by the street lamps and settled on the ground. It made Masha wonder to see such white snow coming down from such a dark sky. And how could the large red flowers blossom in the basket on Mama's dressing table in the middle of the winter's snowstorms? But the old gray crow on the branch opposite the window that kept staring unblinkingly at Masha was the most puzzling of all. The crow was waiting for Petrovna to open the little top window to air the room and then to lead Masha off to wash and brush her teeth.

The moment Petrovna and Masha would leave the room, the crow would squeeze through the little top window, snatch the object closest to it and quickly make its way out again. The crow was always in such a hurry it would forget to wipe its feet on the carpet and would leave wet marks on the table.

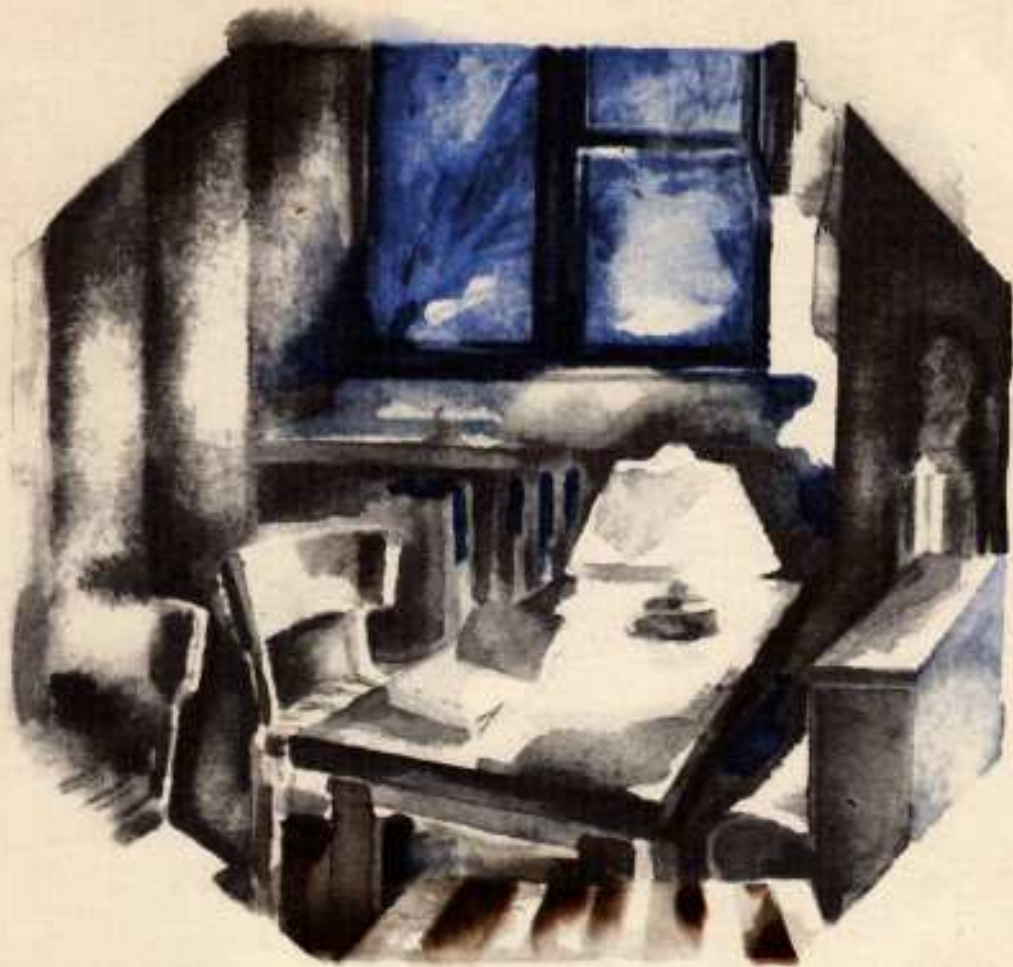
When Petrovna would come back into the room and see the marks she would throw up her hands and shout: "That thief! It's stolen something again!"

Masha would throw up her hands, too, and the two of them would begin hastily searching for whatever it was the crow had stolen this time. It usually made off with whatever bits of food it found in the room: perhaps a cookie or a lump of sugar.

The crow lived in an ice-cream stand that had been boarded up for the winter. It was a cross, stingy old crow that filled up the cracks in the stand with all of its stolen treasures to make sure the neighboring sparrows didn't make off with them.

Sometimes it dreamed that the sparrows had sneaked into the ice-cream stand and were pecking away at the bits of apple peel, frozen sausage or candy wrappers that were wedged into the cracks. Then the crow would caw angrily in its sleep, and the militiaman on the corner would look around and listen intently. He had been hearing that cawing at night for quite some time, and it had puzzled him. He had gone over to the stand several times and peered inside, shielding his eyes from the light of the lamppost with his hands. But it was dark inside. All he could see was a broken crate on the floor.

One day the crow came upon a little ruffled sparrow named Pashka in the stand.



These were hard times for the sparrows. There were hardly any oats to be found, as there were very few horses in the big city now. In the good old days—this was a tale passed down among them and told to him by his grandfather Chirp—the sparrows had spent their days hopping about near the hack stands where oats would spill onto the ground from the horses' feed bags.

Nowadays the city was full of cars and trucks. Cars never ate oats, munching loudly like the good-natured horses used to do. Instead, they drank gallons of an evil-smelling, poisonous liquid. And so there were now much fewer city sparrows than before. Some had flown away to the country, to be near the horses, while others had gone off to the port cities, where grain is loaded onto ships. The sparrows there are happy and never go hungry.

"In the good old days," Grandfather Chirp said, "sparrows would get together in flocks of two and three thousand. When a flock took wing, cutting through the air, why, even the cabbies' horses would rear up and whinny: 'Can't anything be done about these sparrows?'"

"And you can't imagine the great sparrow battles waged at the market places! Feathers flew in all directions. People would never stand for such a battle nowadays."

The old crow came upon Pashka just as he darted into the stand. Before he had a chance to peck at anything wedged there the crow pecked him on the head.

Pashka tumbled over, shut his eyes and played dead.

The crow tossed him out and cawed loudly, scolding every thief of a sparrow in the world.

The militiaman looked around and went over to the stand. Pashka lay on the snow. His head was splitting. He kept opening and closing his beak feebly.

"Ah, you homeless waif," the militiaman said, pulled off his mitten, tucked Pashka into it and put the mitten in his pocket. "You sure have a hard life."

Pashka lay in the mitten in the man's pocket and wept, for he felt very hurt and was very hungry. If only he could have a few crumbs, he'd surely feel much better. But there were no bread crumbs in the militiaman's pocket, nothing but some awful-smelling crumbs of tobacco.

When Petrovna took Masha out to the park to play the next day the militiaman came up to them.

"Do you want a sparrow? To bring up at home?" he said to Masha.

And Masha replied that she wanted a sparrow very badly. Then the man's ruddy, weatherbeaten face became all wrinkled and he grinned as he took his mitten from his pocket. It was the mitten with Pashka inside.

"Here. Leave him in the mitten, or he'll freeze. You can return it later. I'll be here till noon," he said.

Masha took Pashka home, smoothed his feathers with a brush, fed him and let him fly around the room. Pashka perched on the edge of a saucer, had a few sips of tea from it, then flew to the brass blacksmith and perched on his head. He was just about to doze off when the smith became very angry and swung his hammer. He looked as if he was about to hit Pashka. Pashka flew off and



settled on another bronze head. This one belonged to Ivan Krylov, who had written so many famous fables. Pashka had a hard time trying to keep his balance on Krylov's slippery head. Meanwhile, the angry smith began striking his anvil, eleven times in all.

Pashka spent a day and a night in Masha's room. He saw the old crow squeeze in through the little top window and make off with a piece of apple that had been left on a plate on the table. Pashka hid behind the basket of red flowers and was very still.

After that Pashka came to visit Masha every day. He pecked at the crumbs she gave him and tried to think of a way to repay her kindness. One day he brought her a frozen spiky caterpillar he had found on a tree in the park, but Masha didn't eat it. Petrovna became very cross and threw it out the window.





Then, to spite the old crow, Pashka began pecking out the bits and scraps it had stolen and hidden away in the cracks. He was going to return them all to Masha. One day Pashka brought her a frozen marshmallow, the next a piece of dry pie crust, and the day after that a red candy wrapper.

The crow had been stealing from others, too, because sometimes Pashka would make a mistake and bring Masha things that didn't belong to her. Once he brought her a piece of a pocket comb, then a playing card (it was the queen of clubs), and then a gold fountain pen point.

Pashka would come flying in with whatever he had brought, drop it on the floor, circle the room a few times and whiz out of the window again like a tiny, fluffy cannonball.

One evening Petrovna fell asleep after supper. Masha was anxious to see the crow squeeze in through the little top window, for she had never actually seen that happen.

She climbed onto a chair, opened the little window and hid behind the wardrobe. At first, large snowflakes drifted in and melted on the floor. Then there was a scratching sound. The crow squeezed through the window and into the room, hopped onto Mama's dressing table, looked into the mirror and ruffled its feathers, for it was staring at another angry old crow. Then it cawed, snatched up the tiny glass bouquet and flew out the window.

Masha cried out. Petrovna awoke and began to scold and moan. When Mama returned from the theater and learned what had happened, she wept so bitterly it made Masha cry, too. Petrovna tried to comfort Mama, saying that the glass flowers might yet be



found if the stupid old crow hadn't dropped the bouquet in the snow.

The next morning Pashka came to visit. He perched on Krylov's bronze head, heard the sad news of the stolen bouquet, ruffled his feathers and set to thinking. Then, when Mama went off to rehearsal, Pashka tagged along.

He flew from sign to lamppost, from lamppost to tree until they reached the theater. There he settled on the head of one of the bronze horses on the roof, cleaned his beak, scratched his eyelid with his foot, chirped and flew away.

That evening Mama told Masha to put on her lace-edged white pinafore. Petrovna put on her fine silk shawl, and they all went off to the theater.

That was when Pashka, doing as Grandfather Chirp had told him to do, summoned all the neighborhood sparrows. They were going to attack the ice-cream stand in which old crow had hidden the glass bouquet.

At first, the flock settled on the nearby trees and began taunting the crow. The sparrows hoped it would get angry and fly out at them. Then they would attack it out in the open, where there was so much space and where they could fly at it from all sides. But the crow was old and wise. It guessed the sparrows' plans and stayed inside the ice-cream stand.

Finally, the sparrows got up the courage to dart into the booth one after another. The commotion was so great that a crowd gathered outside.

The militiaman came running. He peered into the stand, but all he could see was a cloud of sparrow feathers. "Why, it's a regular battle," he said and began pulling off the boards that were nailed across the door, because he wanted to stop the fight.

At that very moment in the theater the violinists and cellists in the orchestra pit raised their bows. The conductor raised his pale hand and moved it slowly. The heavy velvet curtain rippled and parted to the gathering sounds of the music.

Masha saw a large, sunlit room, the two ugly, richly dressed step-sisters, the evil stepmother and her own mother, so slim and beautiful, dressed in gray tatters. "Cinderella!" Masha breathed. She could not take her eyes from the stage.

In the next scene the palace appeared amidst blue, pink and gold lights that blended with the moonlight. As Mama hurried away on the stroke of midnight, she lost her little glass slipper.

It was comforting to hear the music grieving and rejoicing when Mama grieved or rejoiced, just as if all the violins, oboes, flutes and trombones were dear, kind, living creatures. All of them, and the conductor, too, seemed to be trying to help Mama. The conductor was trying so hard that he never once turned around to look at the audience. It was really a shame, because there were so many children with shining eyes and flaming cheeks there.

Even the old ushers who never watched the performance but stood in the corridors holding little stacks of programs and opera glasses, even they now tiptoed inside, pulled the doors shut softly behind them and stood watching Masha's mother. One of them dabbed at his eyes. And no wonder, for Mama was the daughter of his departed friend, an usher like himself, and she was dancing so beautifully.

At last, when the ballet was ending and the music soared joyously in the finale, bringing smiles to all faces and making many wonder why there were tears in Cinderella's eyes, at that very moment a tiny ruffled sparrow flew out over the stage after having darted frantically along the stairways and corridors. One could see he had been in a terrible fight.

The sparrow circled over the stage. There was something in his beak that sparkled and looked like a crystal twig.

A murmur went through the audience. The conductor raised his hand. The orchestra stopped playing. People in the back rows stood up to see what it was all about. The sparrow flew up to Cinderella. She held out her hands, and he dropped a tiny bouquet of glass flowers into them. Cinderella pinned the bouquet to her bodice with trembling fingers.

The conductor raised his baton, music filled the theater once again, and the audience burst into applause, making the lights shimmer. The sparrow flew up to the ceiling, perched on the great crystal chandelier and began smoothing his ruffled feathers.

Cinderella bowed and smiled, and if Masha hadn't known it was her own dear mama, she would never have guessed it.

Late that night, when Masha was tucked into bed and was drifting off to sleep, she said to her mama, "Were you thinking of Daddy when you pinned the bouquet to your bodice, Mama?"

"Yes," Mama said after a moment's silence.

"Then why did you cry?"

"Because I was so happy there were people like your daddy in the world."



"That's not true," Masha mumbled. "People laugh when they're happy."

"A little joy makes you laugh," Mama said, "great happiness can make you cry. Now go to sleep."

And Masha fell asleep.

Mama went over to the window. Pashka was perched on a branch outside. He was asleep, too. Everything was very still. The large snowflakes that kept drifting down from the sky just added to the stillness. Mama stood there, thinking that happy dreams and fairy-tales come drifting down as gently as the snow at night.





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